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SUBJECT: BROKEN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OFFERS NO EASY FIXES

REF: CASABLANCA 0027

11. (SBU) Sensitive but Unclassified - entire text.

12. (SBU) Summary: The backdrop to our efforts to negotiate a bilateral agreement on American schools in Morocco is a national education system that is widely believed to be broken beyond repair. This grim reality was highlighted in this week's World Bank report on education in the Middle East and North Africa. While attendance at primary school is up significantly following years of concerted efforts, retention of students in later years is poor, so that only 13 percent of Moroccan students finish high school. Spending is well below regional averages at 525 USD per student, despite significant increases over the past 20 years. If the diagnosis of the system's failure is not in doubt, as was evident in Prime Minister El Fassi's observation this week that the World Bank study conveyed "nothing new," solutions remain elusive. What is clear is that Morocco's poor education system limits social mobility, exacerbating social tensions and increasing disparities in income distribution. End Summary.

13. (U) The World Bank's report on education in the MENA region, released earlier this week, confirmed once again that Morocco is lagging badly behind its peers in the educational realm, a reality that has been widely conceded for years, but that no government has yet been able to address effectively. The report showed that on issues ranging from access to education to gender equality and exam results, Morocco is well behind other countries in the region, including Tunisia and Jordan.

14. (U) Recent workshops in Rabat confirm the diagnosis, and offer other alarming insights into the state of Moroccan education. Of 100 students who enter primary school, statistics show only 13 will pass the baccalaureate exam (and only 3 of the 13 will do so on their first try). The median length of school attendance is only 5 years, well short of the 10-12 year median elsewhere in the region. Thus, school attendance drops to 74.5 percent by the age of 14, and to 48 percent by the final years of high school. Only 12 of 100 students will go on to higher education, but of that group only between 4 and 10 percent will ultimately complete a degree. The discouragement of such students is understandable, however, as unemployment rates are highest among the most educated groups in the country: 30 percent for those who completed the baccalaureate, but 45 percent for those who have a university diploma.

15. (U) Of equal or greater concern is the failure of students to master basic skills. A study carried out through the "Education For All" program showed that only 16 percent of

students in the fourth year of primary school had mastered their course material, a failure rate of over 80 percent. In some cities the rate was even worse, most notably in Ifrane, where the success rate was only 0.7 percent. Scores on international exams confirm the poor results-- Moroccan students placed last of 25 countries in this age group in mathematics, and 24th on science. In a separate exam, students placed 43rd out of 45 countries in reading, with only 25 percent of students attaining the minimum score required for their age group.

¶6. (U) Looking at this overall picture, Education Minister Ahmed Akhchichine last month characterized the overall state of Moroccan education as "disastrous," notwithstanding improvement in headline figures such as the percentage of students attending primary school, particularly in rural areas. Critics attribute this failure to poor school facilities and materials, noting that Morocco only spends 525 dollars per pupil per year, compared to 1342 dollars in Tunisia (though only 612 in Turkey). They also flag the failure to attract, motivate, and retain talented teachers. Teachers, they note, are inadequately trained, poorly paid, and lack motivation. Many go into teaching as a last resort, since they cannot find other jobs. While discussion has centered on the need to retrain this teaching corps, the government has yet to produce a plan to that effect. Instead, business as usual has continued, with announcement in early February that the Education Ministry will recruit 1100 new teachers from the ranks of unemployed graduates. The news prompted a scathing editorial from the business daily "L'Economiste," arguing that "the majority of these unemployed graduates are not adapted to the imperatives of development in Morocco" and will "scrupulously reproduce" the failure evident in the poor test results in Ifrane.

¶7. (U) Despite the increasing attention to the problem, the government has yet to show its hand on school reform. Prime Minister El Fassi told the press on February 7 that the World Bank study "did not contain anything new," and that the government is already aware of the system's shortcomings, including dilapidated infrastructure, continuing problems with access, and failure to prepare graduates for the working world. The Prime Minister admitted that "radical reform" is required, and said that proposals would be forthcoming after completion of an ongoing study of the sector. (Minister Akhchichine separately indicated that the new reform initiative could be made public as early as March.)

¶8. (U) For his part, Royal Advisor Meziane Belfkih, who was specifically charged by the King with overseeing education reform and has as much or more influence than the Minister himself, has floated several proposals, including seeking to raise school attendance to 95 percent by 2014 and to make it mandatory until the age of 15. He has also suggested that the private sector needs to shoulder more of the load in basic education. That system has expanded significantly and now represents over 8 percent of student enrollment, but he suggests that percentage should more than double to 20 percent. Accomplishment of this objective, in Akhchichine's view, however, will require development of an economic model for private education different from that which currently exists. Both concede the need to address issues relating to teacher quality, and note that a survey of 2000 teachers is currently being conducted, and should be completed by the fall.

¶9. (SBU) Complicating the government's situation is the fact that the obvious solutions of increased spending and enlarged access have already been undertaken. A recent evaluation by the Centre Marocain de Conjoncture noted that spending on education increased an average of 6 percent from 1990 to 2005, or 3 percent in real terms, with the total (which increased from 11.2 to 26.8 billion MAD) representing an average of 24 to 26 percent of government spending each year. This represented 5.9 percent of GDP in 2005, 9.3 percent of GDP when university and private education are factored in. This resulted in increased attendance at the primary level in particular, up from 54 to 92 percent overall, and from 39 to 88 percent in rural areas. During

that period, over 8000 new schools were put into service, and the ranks of teachers were augmented at a rate of 2.7 percent per year.

¶10. (SBU) Government reform promises thus continue to engender widespread scepticism. It is notable that Morocco's principal business lobbying group, the Cassablanca-based Confederation Generale des Entreprises du Maroc (CGEM), steered clear of the subject in its key reform recommendations to the El Fassi government. The group's Secretary-General told us the decision was strategic: The

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group concedes that education reform is urgently needed, but believes that if it had focused on the larger problems of education, its recommendations would have been "put in a drawer and ignored." By focusing on retraining programs to "correct the shortcomings" of the educational system, however, it believes it has an opportunity to secure action in the short to medium term.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: CGEM's ability to focus on a particular sub-facet of the education issue is a luxury neither Morocco nor its government enjoys. All admit that the failure of Morocco's education system to prepare the country's younger generations for the challenges of a global economy is a key constraint on Morocco's economic development, and it must be addressed urgently. In addition, as a constraint to mobility, it has the potential to exacerbate social tensions linked to growing disparities of wealth. All eyes are on the government to outline its plan of action to tackle the problem and El Fassi and his team will be judged in no small measure on what they are able to accomplish. To date, however, successive Moroccan governments have shown only a limited capacity to address the ongoing education crisis, and we see no sign that this has changed. End Summary.

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